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Scientists form team to monitor Mead's future

By Mary Manning
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Federal, state and local scientists met in Las Vegas last week, forming a partnership to check the vital signs of Lake Mead and the Lower Colorado River.

Vital signs are the elements indicating the health of the water creatures, plants, animals and birds that live at Lake Mead National Recreation Area, said National Park Service Superintendent Alan O'Neill, who watched the three-day session for the direction to take the lake into the next century.

The Park Service is spearheading the effort to keep its cultural and natural resources sheltered within preserves and reserves into the 21st century without destroying them.

Scientists, attending the sessions to set these goals, agreed that these natural systems and their resources are threatened by a host of complex biological and cultural changes.

As the public's demand for enjoying areas of Lake Mead increases with rapid population growth in the Southwest, biologists and zoologists, limnologists and microbiologists met to determine important directions for keeping water quality, endangered species and recreationists in a delicate balance.

Since 10 million people a year visit Lake Mead, such scientific attention is long overdue.

In the past year, water samples have revealed a host of pesticides, toxins, endocrine disrupters, the rocket fuel booster perchlorate and algae competing with living things in Lake Mead.

Whether those things pose a threat to human health and the very survival of the Colorado River itself will keep scientists busy for months.

The difference in the approach to such scientific studies this time is rooted in cooperation between different government agencies at different political levels.

In addition to the Park Service, the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the U.S. Geological Survey and the Southern Nevada Water Authority will play roles in monitoring the water, plants, fish, microscopic life, chemicals and other changes in the lake.

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Water quality topped the list of priorities for these scientists to track.

With fecal bacteria a prime candidate for international standards, the scientists agreed to test all coves heavily used by swimmers and boaters as well as bathing beaches, which are not routinely tested.

If high levels of fecal bacteria, found in all warm-blooded animals, are measured, the Park Service might warn those in contact with the water about the bacterial levels.

Another water quality issue will be the balance between acid and alkalinity in the water, as measured on the pH scale. Ideal pH levels register seven on a scale from one to 14.

A steady trend of higher pH levels in the Colorado River over the past 30 years has scientists hunting for sources of the change and more monitoring to watch the changes. If the pH imbalance continues, fish kills could become more frequent on the river.

The scientists also will watch native fishes struggling to survive against sports fish such as striped bass and trout in the lake and the river system.

The razorback sucker and the bonytail chub are both endangered species, fish that thrived in the river before dams like Hoover and Glen Canyon were built.

The goal for the Park Service is to enter the 21st century without losing a native species.

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